



# CHILDREN AND WORRIES ABOUT WAR

Helps and hints for parents and other  
adults who want to help kids cope  
with troubled times



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# CHILDREN AND WAR-RELATED ANXIETY

## **The Issue:**

As we prepare for a war we hope will not happen,

- Parents are being deployed on short notice
- Anxieties abound among adults (parents, teachers, and significant adults in children's lives)
- Planning is being conducted by wing leaders and plans are being implemented: at this stage, plans can only be tentative and implementation is on a contingency basis—often, they are taken as certitudes and only half understood
- Rumors are flying: some cannot be corrected because of security considerations
- News media carry ominous threats of war; not a lot of consideration is given to the diplomatic measures to achieve peace
- Adult anxieties and fears lead to tension; tension leads to overt and covert behaviors that are hard to understand and sometimes hard to accept

## **Genesis of Problems:**

- Adult fears and anxieties are transmitted to children both directly and indirectly
  - Directly
    - Adults' discussion of fears and anxieties with children
    - Adults' prediction of calamitous consequences
    - Adults' attention fixed on rumors, plans and probable consequences to the detriment of paying attention to children's welfare and needs
  - Indirectly
    - Short-tempered
    - Unable to focus on children's needs, feelings and concerns
    - Acting-out behaviors (e.g., yelling, hitting, blaming, cold-shoulder)
    - Using child as if he/she were part of an adult support system
      - Unrealistic expectations
      - Unrealistic sharing of inner turmoil, looking to child for solutions
    - Over-protective behaviors, hyper-vigilance OR lack of interest
    - Depression, obsessive behaviors or personality change
- Children internalize these anxieties and fears
  - They do not feel free to discuss them with parents—they grow in intensity without any reality check
  - Reinforced
    - They try, all by themselves, to cope with/alleviate/divert these overwhelming fears and anxieties
- When adults are too preoccupied to listen or to “read the signs” children attempt to communicate their anxieties via maladaptive behaviors

## **Problematic Aspects:**

Children are not used to dealing with overwhelming fear: it can be traumatizing to them unless a more experienced and trusted person (parent/other adult) can perform a reality check that allows them to put their fears “out on the table” and into perspective.

Children have a very difficult time initiating a discussion of their hidden fears; sometimes there is an element of irrational guilt linked to these fears and this compounds the child’s inability to discuss them. Since children are prone to react to events on a tangible and physical level, rather than on a verbal and intellectual level, they communicate through their behaviors.

Unfortunately, adults are often not able to see beyond the immediate behavior to the concern/emotion for which it stands. We can’t break the code very easily.

- Children usually convey emotions, concerns through behaviors (usually negative).  
SOME of these communicating behaviors are:
  - Increase in acting out behaviors
    - Fighting/bullying
    - Defying school/classroom rules
    - Defying parents/disobeying rules
      - Even where the child had previously been quite docile
    - Stealing
    - Lying
    - Getting involved with the “wrong crowd”
    - Overly boisterous play; inability (apparent unwillingness) to be appropriately quiet indoors, in groups and in structured situations
    - Inattentiveness, rudeness and interrupting verbally and physically
    - Provoking siblings, classmates or other peers to act out
    - Injuring animals; sadistic behaviors teasing towards animals
    - Sexual acting-out
  - Increase in withdrawing behaviors
    - Spending more time alone
    - Setting up rejections by peers
    - Losing interest in favorite activities
    - Losing interest in friends (both peer and adult)
    - Refusing invitations to activities previously enjoyed
    - Marked decrease in overall activity level
    - “Escaping” through reading, TV or other fantasy
  - Increase in depressive behaviors
    - Withdrawing
    - Noticeable loss of appetite OR increase in appetite
    - Difficulty sleeping OR marked difficulty in awakening, starting the day
    - Refusal to attend school or other regular activities
    - Crying or sadness (including crying oneself to sleep)
  - Increase in physical symptoms
    - Increase in stomachaches or headaches
    - More physical injuries because of apparent awkwardness or lack of coordination

- Tiredness, listlessness OR constant activity
- Increase in regressive behaviors
  - Thumb sucking
  - Bed-wetting
  - Physical clinging to parent, constant demands for attention
  - Whining
  - Newly expressed fear of the dark, animals, storms, etc.
- Changes in symbolic and intellectual behaviors
  - Drawings becoming more violent
  - Play becoming more based on violence, war or injuring others
  - Writes or researches about violence, horror or fright

All of the above behaviors are the child's (usually subconscious) efforts to communicate his/her anxiety and fears for his/her (potentially) deployed parents' safety and a fear that the other parent might leave him/her; the stability of his/her own situation in life; the sudden and unpredictable terror that exists in the world; and a feeling of helplessness in the face of the world events and threats of violence.

### **Proposed Solutions:**

There is no easy solution. Every child, every situation, every parent is vastly different. Each child communicates in his/her own behavioral language, and that means that we adults have to understand a variety of languages—and we haven't been very well educated in the nuances of "child behavior-ese." Here are some suggestions, though, for the adults in these children's lives. However, despite the differences in children's personalities or ages there are some generalizations that make sense.

- Within yourself
  - Analyze the rumors: don't accept anything at face value, don't panic
    - Use knowledgeable sources for information: get the facts!
    - Official channels
    - Attend squadron, other informational meetings—ask questions
    - Listen to news reports, read the papers/magazines—but don't accept everything as the gospel truth
    - Attend any informational meetings held by the schools, squadrons, Family support, etc.
    - Don't be afraid to ask "why" and to request details
  - Bounce your feelings off trusted, objective friends
    - Puts things into perspective
    - Allays panic
  - Discuss issues with your spouse: **have a plan—have a variety of plans (because there are a variety of possibilities)**
    - What are realistic possibilities and how can you prepare for each one?
    - How to keep in touch if deployed?
    - What "reward" should there be at the end of deployment?
    - How to observe/share special days?

- What special touches/messages will keep you connected during a deployment—how will you carry them out?
- Ensure that all is ready for deployment
  - Legal
  - Personal (cars, payments, visits, etc.)
  - Practical (sunscreen, uniform, patches, etc.)
- The more spouses talk ahead of time about the range of possibilities, and try to fathom responses (and proactive steps) for each possibility, the less anxiety is felt (anxiety is “fear of the unknown”) if you plan, you at least know something!
- Determine what helps you best combat personal stress (your own stress-busters). You can’t effectively help a stressed/anxious child if your own energy is sabotaged by a multitude of personal anxieties.
  - Why? What creates stress:
    - The external situation
    - Your internal response to it
    - Feelings of guilt, being unprepared, etc.,
    - Kids’ behaviors, attitudes and illnesses
    - Doing two parents’ work
    - Not knowing how the spouse is doing
  - How?
    - Co-op the child care (you’ll need to find trusted allies)
      - Give Parents-A-Break—Family Support
      - Chapel groups and programs
      - Squadron/Flight spouses
      - Neighbors
      - AYP, school programs, Club Beyond
      - Operation Helping Hand
    - Let somebody else be responsible once in a while—farm kids out occasionally: it broadens their horizons and brightens yours!
      - Overnights
      - Movies, athletic events
      - Scouts, youth group trips
    - Pamper yourself while the kids are gone
    - Volunteer to do something that makes your life more meaningful
      - *Most of us need to be able to do something tangible to address the threatening situation—volunteering is a way to do something that positively impacts the lives of others who are affected by terrorism. It also gives you some sense of competence and control.*
    - Learn something you’ve always wanted to learn
    - Read—fact or fantasy
    - Exercise—with a goal or just to reduce tension
    - Write letters or journals: introspect
    - Do absolutely nothing for an hour or so

- Overall, keep yourself busy enough so that you honestly have to plan your days to get everything done well
- Getting the facts provides some confidence that you are in control of at least some aspects of a threatening situation.
- Getting (and taking) the opportunity to relax helps you to relieve tension. The more relaxed and confident you are able to become, the more of a relaxed and confident attitude you can share with your child.
- This is an atmosphere that will allow a child to believe that you have the ability to help them conquer their fears—you are the adult and you are in control. It also gives him/her permission—and the confidence—to verbalize anxieties and fears instead of acting them out in ways that will probably gain negative feedback from peers and adults (including parents) and simply make the child feel less competent and more anxious.
- Relating to the child
  - Keep reminding yourself that ALL behaviors (your behavior, as much as the child's) are attempts to communicate something.
    - Keep reminding yourself that no adult can always understand the “secret code” of a child’s behavior—no need to feel guilty or that you’re a “bad parent” when children’s behavior makes you angry.
    - Keep a finger on the pulse of your own feelings and behaviors, and be aware that the child may be reflecting your own conscious or unconscious feelings (fear, hostility, anger, perplexity, pride, confidence, etc.). This will help you to read the child’s behavior.
    - Remember that you are the adult, and that the child relies on your experience and your competence—even when he/she seems to be questioning it the most by his/her behavior.
  - Remember that for a child, the most terrifying feeling is that of being out of control—both of what he/she does to others and of what others may do to him/her.
    - Share your objective/calm observations about the world scene and its impact at Aviano with your child rather frequently.
    - Watch the news with your child (once a day is enough) and interpret some of the more potentially frightening statements for him/her.
      - Provide reassurance, physically and verbally, as the child seems to be asking for it—start light, work up in degree as the child seems to need to accept hugs, verbal reassurances, and other “I care” messages
      - Note, verbally, after watching, that certain things seemed to concern him/her (the child’s body language will give you clues about this)—draw the child into a bit of a dialogue
    - Talk about many other aspects of the child’s feelings and experiences during the day (if you don’t already do so) and discuss anxieties within this matter-of-fact context

- Bedtime can be a great time for gentle talking
    - Your attitude can help the child relax into sleep
    - Children tend to be a bit more introspective and aware of their feelings at the end of the day
  - Be willing to verbalize your feelings (frustration, anger, sadness, etc.) about a child's negative behaviors and then share with him/her that sometimes negative behaviors are the way for a child to begin to communicate about concerns.
    - Let the child know you understand where he/she is coming from and that it must be frustrating to not be able to put thoughts into words
    - Let him/her also know that negative and inappropriate behaviors do have consequences if they are harmful to others
    - Keep emphasizing that you love him/her and will protect him/her
  - Discuss any plans that you and your spouse or that the school or other agencies, may be considering if they will affect the child—knowledge is power, and the child needs to possess some information, critically considered, in order to feel some sense of power over the perceived threat
    - Be certain that the child understands all aspects of the plan and how it will affect him/her
      - Ensure that there are no misunderstood words
      - Ensure that there are no unanswered questions
      - Do some role playing or “what if” scenarios
    - Help the child to understand that the plan is not for something that certainly will happen, but rather a “just in case” plan—much like the plan to scream or shout because he/she feels uncomfortable “when/if” a stranger approaches with an offer of candy or a request to find a lost dog
  - Ask the child what peers are saying
    - What are the rumors?
      - Dispel those that you can
      - Promise to check out the others for the child
    - What are peers talking about?
      - Often this question allows a child to get his/her own concerns out in the open
  - Be the “reality check” for the child
- If the child appears troubled beyond your ability to help
- Seek professional help without a lengthy delay
    - School counselors
    - Family Support Center
    - Clinic—Pediatrics
    - Chaplain
  - Call to make an appointment and explain your concerns briefly. It might be a good idea, if possible, for you to talk with the potential counselor alone first to ensure that counseling is a good option for your child.

- If the counselor agrees to see the child, explain to the child that you are concerned about his/her worries and want to make sure that they are heard by someone who had helped other children deal successfully with their anxieties. Don't let the visit to the counselor become an unexpected and unpleasant surprise to your child.
- Make certain that both you AND your child feel comfortable with the professional you approach as a counselor.
  - Ask for an evaluative (get-acquainted) meeting first so that both the prospective counselor and the family (you and the child) can assess whether counseling will be productive and helpful
  - Ensure that the counselor explains to both you and the child what services he/she can provide, states his/her understanding of confidentiality and lets you know his/her qualifications, experience and any limitations or restrictions.
  - Respect your gut feeling.
- The counselor may decide that a single session is sufficient or may judge that multiple individual or group sessions will best help the child.
- Be prepared to be an active participant in the counseling, either by your presence while the child is talking to the counselor or by carrying out "homework assignments" the counselor may suggest to you—or both.
- Be willing to talk calmly and reassuringly with your child about what happens in counseling—IF he/she brings up the subject, but don't ever pry or ask what they talked about. Confidentiality is important to the child and he/she will share with you when the time seems appropriate.
- Know that the counselor MAY become a sort of "hero" to the child. Don't get upset or concerned about this seeming transfer of allegiance or respect from you to the counselor.
  - For most children, the one-on-one or small group aspect of counseling gives a feeling of affirmation and importance.
  - All good counselors know that "anyone can be an affirming and pleasant hero to a child when he/she sees the child only 1-hour a week." No worthwhile counselor is going to believe that he/she has more importance in the child's life than the parent.

### **Conclusions:**

Right now, you are the most important person in your child's life—no matter what the child's age. Your child expects you somehow to know all the answers and to be able to reassuringly predict a positive future. That's a difficult role in any event and it really becomes impossible in times of strife and tension when you have your own anxieties, fears, questions and loneliness.

So.....

- Try to keep up the family's traditions and its memories. Celebrate birthdays, good report cards, great basketball games, the first day of spring, etc.—anything and everything. This is a pleasant and reassuring affirmation of family bonds and gives the child a sense of normalcy and predictability.



- Keep a family journal: you and the children can write brief notes about family and personal events and milestones. With e-mail you can share them regularly with the relatives back in the States—with an inexpensive digital camera, you can even share pictures. With snail mail and a small camera, you can do the same thing—but not as quickly. If your spouse becomes deployed, you'll easily be able to include him/her in that already-established way of sharing the family's significant events. Your families in the States may want to take part in this sharing, too.
- Don't be afraid to "farm out" the children once in a while so that you can pamper yourself—to trusted neighbors, school activities, scouts, youth groups or sports. Just know that you'll have to be the "farm-ee" once in a while, too, so that other parents can pamper themselves.
- Check rumor control often. Go to trusted sources.
- Let your child know often by word and deed that he/she is treasured—but let him/her know also that you can get angry or upset sometimes, too.
  - Don't be afraid to apply pre-determined consequences (positive or negative) for your child's behaviors...don't let the child run a guilt-trip on you. Discuss consequences in advance (in a fairly general way) and then apply the consequences predictably and with as little emotion as possible.
  - The big three of parenting: **firm, fair and consistent.**
  - Don't be afraid to apologize if you truly feel that your behaviors towards the child were out of line. Children are very, very gracious about legitimate "I'm sorry" messages from adults.
  - Don't be afraid to tell the child, using your own phrasing: "I need a little time to myself right now, check back with me in half an hour."
    - The better you care for your emotional and spiritual needs, the better equipped you will be to care for those of your child.
    - Children understand—they really do.
- Keep busy with the things that give meaning to your life and help your children to find meaning for their lives, too. Cherish your friends, cherish their friends...and cherish yourself.
- Finally, keep in touch with God and trust that He will help.

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